

Quoted from an email I wrote in November 2017:

“The parable about the wise and foolish virgins fits in as well. The wise virgins relied on their own judgment. Then, they made sure that they didn’t share with the foolish virgins. This was not to be uncharitable, but to refuse to let anyone get in the way of their own paths to God. The foolish virgins just went with the flow, and were unprepared, because they didn’t think of the best decision. I’m getting the sense that Jesus means that the individual knows his or her way to God, and shouldn’t just be pushed along by the events, crowd, etc. So, as far as God is concerned, follow your heart to your relationship with him, not so much a set of conventions.”

Quoted from November 2017:

Add in the fact that the story of the "Prodigal Son" introduces the dangers of non-conforming to social convention (unswerving obedience to a patriarch) in a world full of vice, and you really get a message of how all of us need to rely on God, and only God, to make everything right. The material world lured this young man from God, and only by admitting the need for God, and going back to God (by choice), could all be made right. Meanwhile, strict lifelong obedience to the father's commands was not what made the elder brother worthy of Heaven. Only love could bring the elder brother into Heaven. The elder brother needed to be a loving and forgiving man before he could appreciate the Heaven made by the father's love.

I don't know; these are simply musings. But, I do believe that these speculations on Biblical teachings have helped me recently when it comes to accepting my own role in the world.”

Quoted from an email I wrote in April 2017:

“You know, for a while, I was unhappy about Matthew 7:6 (at least the traditional interpretations). I'm not convinced that these words were said, and I'm sure that no one knows how they were meant to be taken. It's the verse about "pearls before swine." I

don't think it's fair to compare people to swine. First of all, swine are creatures of God, and therefore deserve respect, and not contempt and disgust from humans. Second, a swine is not a person. People can expand their minds and hearts beyond the capabilities of pigs. Although most people might be like swine, and therefore incapable of understanding and appreciating the pearls, we should never rule out the possibility that one of the pig-people might actually expand his or her mind one day to enjoy the beauty of these precious objects which serve as symbols of truths. How will a pig ever be anything but a pig if he has no idea that there are pearls out there in the universe? I also don't think that God intended for humans to give up on other people. I'm certain that all of us gain from pearls. I might not be great with the pearls of computer science, but I still benefited from them. And, I do understand historical, literary, artistic, and philosophical pearls. Swine who are not intellectually capable of doing differential equations still benefit from this knowledge. Furthermore, though not good at higher-level mathematics, they still might be able to learn to read and write. Some knowledge is better than nothing.

I had to conclude another lesson from Matthew 7:6. What if "swine" actually does not refer to individuals, but rather to society as a whole? If so, is society ever capable of understanding pearls? Probably not. I think we might be able to conclude that these words were foreshadowing of the pains that Christians would endure throughout the ages at the hands of their societies. I think that Jesus meant for us to be strong about this issue. I do not believe that Matthew 7:6 is a command or a warning against certain behaviors. It really might have been intended to comfort followers in the face of being misunderstood and persecuted in future times.

But, can society benefit from pearls? Of course! Besides, God does not withhold pearls from swine. That's why Jesus was on Earth in the first place. Also, early Christians did not hide their pearls/truths from swine/society, and look at all the global benefits that came from that choice. Could it be that the image of "casting" is more important than the other parts of this verse? It does not say anything against wearing pearls, or even offering the pearls, to swine. Did God "cast" the pearl of Jesus to swine, or did he offer it to them? Did early Christians "cast" their religion to society, or did they wear it like a pearl? I tell my students that no one can force enlightenment on another person, let alone society. The individual is most likely fighting against the forces of futility in those cases. However, no one should not allow other people or society to change his or her individuality and spirit. By all means, he or she should wear and enjoy pearls. He or she may hope that, one day, the swine might admire the pearls. However, throwing the pearls away is a no-no; losing the individual spirit because of the swine, or trying to push the pearls of enlightenment on unready people or societies, does not produce good results.

Having the audacity to wear your pearls definitely has its dangers. I also interpret the "Good Shepherd" story from another angle. Why was I always told that the "one lost sheep" represented a sinful person? I don't think that is necessarily how that parable was intended. What if the "lost sheep" has not committed some enormity necessarily, but a person who has questioned the conventions of his or her religion, society, etc.?

He or she has "lost the way" by not following the other sheep. The "good shepherd" finds the "lost sheep" and brings him home, right? How exactly does this happen? Jesus knows the way home, but does he follow one exact path home (the same one he uses to herd the sheep)? Does he bring the "lost sheep" back in line with the other sheep? Does the "lost sheep" penitently learn to follow the same way as the other sheep from now on?

Now, there are people who say that the "good sheep" are the Pharisees. So, Jesus is saying that Pharisees should not be so quick to condemn others so harshly. God rejoices more for the "repentant sinner" than the "righteous men." No one knows what that rejoicing entails, though. No one can define with certainty the "sinner" versus the "righteous men," either. "Sinner" or "righteous men" according to whom? How do we determine which is which? And why would God rejoice more for someone who is a sinner who becomes a "good person" than for someone who never sinned? Do you get points for improvement? Well, we are all both "sinner" and "righteous" person. It's impossible for us to be "righteous" all of the time. So, Jesus says for the Pharisees to "get over themselves," and to repent their own sins. A warning against pride, right? More chastisement for our sinfulness. A story to instruct us to be humble, right?

That's fine. However, is that lesson all that there is to the story? What if the words and parables mean that one actually can become closer to God when he is refusing to be "righteous" like the other men, and striking out on his own way? After all, Christian followers were not "righteous men" according to Jewish traditions and Roman society. They were struggling against their society. So, does the "Good Shepherd" parable mean that individuals who are moving away on their own against conventions of all kinds should rely on and trust God? Will God rejoice because you have learned to cling to him, as opposed to losing your subjectivity by allowing convention to decide right and wrong for you? Furthermore, God is not confined to the righteous sheep, which is why he can leave to find the "one lost sheep." He is not restricted by one group of sheep. He can leave those sheep because their collective does not control him; he is above and beyond them. God leaves the collective to its own devices because he values the individual more than he does any group, no matter how "righteous" that community is. So, Jesus might be admonishing the Pharisees about their attitudes in this story, or he might be speaking about the virtues of forgiveness of sinners. The "Good Shepherd" parable also might be taken further to mean for people to trust God enough to be themselves and follow their own consciences, against following the herd. Maybe a comfort to non-conformers, and instruction to trust and depend on God?

November 2014:

“In an email from November 2014, I also wondered if Jesus placed himself in the “Prodigal Son” story. I wanted to consider whether or not Jesus ever felt like the elder brother. The only child of God who is always righteous was Jesus, and it probably was frustrating for him to watch his “prodigal siblings” get all of the attention and affection from the father. I’m not convinced of this idea so much, but it did lead me to wonder to what extent Jesus spoke to himself in his own teachings. After all, all of us, at various times in our lives, fit into one or more of the three roles of the Prodigal Son parable. I don’t think that it’s completely unrealistic to imagine that Jesus could use his own teachings to sustain him as he fulfilled his role in the human world.”